

Secrets

by Bluebird0032

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Summary: Mark is kept from his Pa who has been seriously injured by an outlaw, and learns that there is nothing good that comes from trying to prove yourself as a man when you aren't one... yet.

Secrets

One quick note... I know in the series Ms. Adams leaves town during the first season but they don't mention the name of the teacher before Mr. Griswold arrives, so I've kept Ms. Adams as the teacher.

Mark hurried Blue Boy down the trail, he just couldn't wait to show his Pa how many fish he had caught! He and the guys had only been fishing for an hour, but they had caught a whole mess of fish! Mark was thinking about how good the fish would taste that night as he entered the yard. Lucas walked over to his son, and upon seeing his father's current disposition, Mark lost his grin.

>'Oh no... What did I forget this time?' Mark asked himself as he shifted uncomfortably under his father's gaze.

>"Mark, you where supposed to be home an hour ago, I was just coming out to look for you." Seeing the fish his son held, he continued. "I can see where you've been, why where you there instead of here?"

>"Sorry Pa, it's just that all the guys where going fishing and I was just going to relax for a few minutes before I came home... I thought some fish would be good for supper, and..." Lucas didn't want to hear any of Mark's excuses.
"Didn't I tell you to come home straight after school?"

>"Well.. Yeah, but-"
"Do you remember why?"

>Suddenly Mark remembered what he had forgotten about.
"Oh...

We're supposed to have supper in town with Mr. Hamilton..."

>"And if you would have been using that brain of yours instead of just thinking about the fun you could have been having, you would have remembered we have several things to deal with in town

before that."

>"I'm sorry, Pa I-"
>"And not only are you going to make us late, I spent over an hour worrying about where you were. Mark, you need to not only be more considerate of other people's time, but also think about the position you put them in. Mark, I was worried about you." Mark began to say something in his defense, but the look his Pa gave him silenced him.

>"For the next month you will come straight home from school and will stay home on the weekends. I will also have a few extra chores to keep you busy."
>"A whole MONTH? But Pa..."

>"No 'but's'."
>"Pa, all I did was-"

>"That's enough Mark. Go inside and get washed up and then we'll ride into town. You can bring the fish you caught to Mrs.

Maguire."
>"Yes, Pa." Mark said as he dismounted from Blue Boy. He understood that he had delayed them... But to have a whole month of extra chores? It just wasn't fair.

>"I'm probably the only kid in the whole territory who gets in trouble for bringing food home." Mark sulked.

The ride into town was silent. Lucas wanted to have conversation with Mark, he liked to deal with an issue and move on, but Mark wouldn't have it that way. Lucas thought of sending Mark back to the ranch, but it looked like that was what Mark wanted, so they continued. Once in town, Lucas told Mark to deliver his fish and get over to the hotel.

"I'm sorry we're late, John. Mark decided to take a fishing trip, he's over at the Maguire's getting rid of his catch right now." Lucas said, apologetically.

>"That's quite alright, boys will be boys." The banker said, smiling at the memory of his own boyhood.
>"I suppose they will, but there comes a point when they need to learn to respect other people's time as well."

>"I suppose there is."
>Mark entered the hotel cafe and upon seeing his father seated with Mr. Hamilton, he walked over to the table.

>"I'm sorry I made us late Mr. Hamilton, I must have forgot about our dinner with you tonight, I sure am sorry." Mark said as he sat down. He figured his Pa had already made apologies, but he'd be expected to make them too and if his Pa had to remind him, that'd be something else wrong he'd done that day.
>"That's quite alright Mark, apology accepted." John replied. Lucas turned to his son.

>"Aren't you forgetting something else?" Lucas asked his son as he pointed to his head. Mark was confused, but then remembered he had forgotten to take his hat off as he entered the building... And as he passed the ladies... And as he sat down at the dinner table.
>"Sorry." Mark said as he removed his hat.

>Most of the talking, as usual, was done by the adults. Mark sat at the table, but wasn't really listening to the conversation anyway. All he could think about was not being able to go fishing or do anything else fun for an entire month.<p>

That night Lucas had already decided to start Mark on a few extra chores and Mark came into the house after he had finished.

>"Everything done properly?" Lucas asked, looking up from his Bible.
>"Yes." Mark answered shortly to his father. Before Mark walked into the bedroom, Lucas called his son over.

>"Mark, I know you don't like being punished, but you have to understand that when you make wrong choices there are consequences."
>"But Pa, I just forgot we were having supper"

with..."

>"You knew you where to come home right after school though, and you decided that enjoying yourself was more of a priority than obeying me."
"Pa, I don't think it's more important it just..."

>"It just seemed not as important at the time?"
Mark thought about this. He tried to deny what his father was saying, but his Pa was right. He had decided to make what he wanted to do more important than what his Pa had said.

>"I'm sorry, Pa." Mark said after a long pause. This time Lucas knew he meant it.
"Alright, son. You head on to bed now. I love you." Lucas said.

>"Love you too Pa." Mark said as he walked to their bedroom.<p>

The day Mark's punishment ended he asked his Pa if he could go fishing with Freddie.

>"I suppose. You be back before dark, understand?" Lucas told Mark, warning him to not repeat his mistake.
"Yes, sir." Mark said as he rode off.

Lucas was cooking supper when Mark entered the house, head down and clothes wet.

>"What happened to you?" Lucas asked, trying to hide the smiling creeping into his face.
"Nothing."

>"Obviously something did. Freddie push you into the pond again?"
"Oh, that, no... We... We decided to take a swim- that's all."

>"Go ahead and get changed, supper will be ready in abou-" Lucas stopped as Mark shut their bedroom door.<p>

As they ate, Lucas noticed Mark was playing with his food more than he was eating it.

>"Mark, are you feeling alright?"
"Uh, yeah. Just tired from swimming."

>"Why didn't you take your clothes off before you went swimming?"
"Well Freddie pushed me in before I could."

>"When I asked you that earlier you said he didn't." Mark looked up, confused.
"I did?"

>"Yes, you did. Mark are you sure you're feeling alright? You don't look very good." Lucas said, confused and concerned.
"Pa, I'm fine, just tired. Can I go to bed?" Mark asked.

>"Early? You?" Lucas said, laughing.

>"Pa, please?" Mark said, not looking up at Lucas.
"Alright, go ahead." Lucas said, his laughter having disappeared.

>'Now what was that all about?' Lucas asked himself.

The next morning Lucas woke and found Mark getting ready to leave for school long before he was supposed to.

>"Mark, what are you doing up this early?"
"Getting ready for school."

>"You don't have to leave for another two hours."
"Well I figured I'd go early and help get everything ready."

>"Like what?"
"Well, like... Whatever needs to be gotten ready."

>"I take it you're feeling better?"
"Like I told you yesterday, I was just tired and now I have plenty of energy. Well I'll see you after school Pa."

>"Wha... Mark?"
"Bye, Pa!" Mark said as he rode off.

>'What is going on?' Lucas asked himself, shaking his head.

Later that day, Lucas and Mark where fixing a broken fence on their property. Lucas could still feel that Mark was hiding something, but couldn't put his finger on what.

>"Mark, you remember a little over a year ago when the Garner brothers where after me and where using you to get under my skin?"
"Well, yeah." Mark said, not sure why his Pa was bringing such a painful memory up.

>"And you remember that last note they sent, saying they where coming after me?" Mark nodded. "You tried keeping that and a lot of other things from me, and that caused us both a great deal of pain. Mark, you and I are partners. I'm your Pa, and you're my son, and so I just wanted to remind you, that around here there is no need to keep secrets." Mark realized what his Pa was trying to do, and it made sense, but it wasn't like he was keeping a serious secret... It wasn't even really a secret. Just something his Pa didn't know about, and didn't need to know about, Mark concluded.
"Ok, Pa. We're running low on nails, I'll ride back to the ranch and get some." Mark was already on Blue Boy and riding away before Lucas could say anything else. Lucas watched his son ride off, but suddenly, Mark was no longer on Blue Boy. Lucas ran over to where Mark lied on the ground.

>"Mark, you all right?"
"Yeah, I'm fine." Mark answered as he rubbed the shoulder he had landed on.

>"Are you sure? You took quite a fall." Lucas said, looking Mark over.
"Pa, I'm fine." Mark said, a bit shortly, as he stood up. Lucas looked from Mark over to the saddle which was lying on the ground. After examining it, he found the problem.

>"Seems your cinch frayed. I can fix it for you if you'd like."
"That's alright Pa, I can fix it." Mark said, carefully choosing his tone. His Pa had given him a look earlier that he didn't want to see again.

That evening Mark was in the barn fixing his cinch when Lucas came in. He stood over Mark and placed his hand on Mark's shoulder. Mark winced at the pain from the bruise. As he finished, he went to put his saddle away. Seeing his son was struggling, Lucas went to help his Mark.

>"I've got it Pa."
"Mark, I don't think you do," he said as he took the saddle. "And I also think you need to let me look at your shoulder. You took quite a tumble."

>"Pa, it was nothing. And I can take care of my own saddle. I'm eleven, almost twelve years old for Pete's sake!"
"Well now, I wouldn't call eleven years and two months almost twelve, and there isn't anything wrong with a father putting away his son's saddle."

>"There is when his son is very capable of doing it himself!" Mark said, raising his voice. Lucas sat down on a hay bail and looked his son in the eye.
"Mark, what exactly has been bothering you?"

>"Everything. I'm growing up and you still treat me like a little kid. You have to know where I am all the time, or you get worried. You check and re-check all my chores. You don't let me do even the little things by myself!"
"Mark, you are growing up, and as you've grown I've given you more responsibilities. But the maturity to take care of those responsibilities isn't fully there yet. You still are a young boy. As you learn to do your chores properly every time you do them, I won't have to check up on them as much. As for worrying about you, you're my son and that's my job. And while we're on the subject, let me check your shoul-"

>"No! Pa, I'm fine, why can't you just leave me be? I don't need

watching over every second of the day!" Mark said as he jumped up. His Pa just didn't seem to be getting it.
"I'm going to bed, it's passed my 'bedtime'." Mark said as he stormed out of the barn.

>Lucas sat in silence for a few minutes. Normally he would have gone straight after Mark, and reprimanded his son for using such a tone, but Mark's words had hit Lucas hard.
'_What did I do to push him away_?' Lucas asked himself. He couldn't believe Mark had straight-up asked Lucas to leave him alone. Lucas was disappointed in Mark for throwing such a tantrum, but Mark had done more than disappointed his father, Mark had hurt him. Lucas was getting ready to enter the house and finish talking with his son when he saw a lone rider in the distance, coming towards the house. He soon recognised the short man and welcomed his friend.

>"Hello Micah, what brings you... what's wrong?" Lucas asked, seeing the frustration on Micah's face.
"Some no good outlaws decided to rob the stage coach that was headed into North Fork, about fifteen miles out of town. I hate to ask you this Lucas, but there's not very many men in town... there all away at that convention. Would you ride with me and the posse we've got together? I need your tacking skills..." Lucas looked from Micah to the house. He knew Micah needed his help and wouldn't ask unless he really needed it. Lucas had stayed home from the convention and asked a few men to go in his place so he could get some extra work done, and spend time with Mark... who he really didn't want to leave in the middle of a fight.

>"Mark and I will pack some things and I'll drop him in town. Can you follow them for a while without me? I'll catch up with you."
"Sure thing Lucas-boy. See you in a while."

>Lucas walked inside the house and saw Mark had washed and put away the dishes.
'_He's trying_' Lucas thought as he sighed. Neither of them liked being at odds, and Mark still thought his Pa was treating him like a baby, but he was going to do everything on his part to make sure he was taking the responsibility he could. Lucas walked into the bedroom and saw Mark was lying down on his bunk, still dressed.

>"Glad you haven't settled in for the night. You need to pack a bag with a couple days worth of clothes. I'm going to see if you can stay with Ms. Hattie while I go help Micah."
"Help Micah with what?" Mark asked.

>"Get packing, we need to leave now." Mark stood up and started getting his things together. Lucas did the same, but continued to talk. "A group of outlaws robbed the stage about fifteen miles from town. Micah needs me on the posse because a lot of men are gone, and he needs me to track. Mark, I don't know how long I'm going to be gone, and we're going to finish talking about this when I get back, but there are a few things we need to straighten out."
Mark and Lucas went outside and saddled the horses. Lucas finishing up his lecture as they entered the outskirts of town.

>" Mark, you are my son and there is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Mark, you know there are bad people in this world and I can only do my best to keep you from them, but as we both know, my best has failed, and that's why I worry about you. I can't keep an eye on you all the time, and as you get older I will have to learn to let go more and more, but when you are one, two, three hours overdue, you should be able to understand why I worry."
"Well Pa, I guess I sort of understand that, but you don't even let me do little things-"

>"Slow down there young man, this is where you go a little over board. I let you do plenty by yourself, a lot of things my father

wouldn't let me do at your age. I let you drive the buck board, I let you ride the fence line with me, go on cattle drives, let you ride the property looking after calves by yourself..."
"But just especially these past few months you've seemed to have been really protective and it's embarrassing. Wh... why can't I go anywhere or do anything without you looking over my shoulder?"

>Lucas let out a sigh. Mark was missing the point and he was running out of time to talk.
"Mark, I love you, but I have to go. Mark, I want you to spend this time in town thinking about the question you asked me - from _my_ perspective."

Lucas caught up with the posse and apologized that he hadn't made it sooner.

>"It's not a problem, Lucas..." Micah started.
"It is. You're only following half the outlaws, the other two turned West quite a ways back."

>"But one horse just went lame and..." one of the men argued
"These men are smart, whoever they are. They made it look like a horse went lame and rode double on it, sending the other three horses and two men South." Lucas corrected.

>"Well at least you caught it. Lucas, James, and I will double back and follow the two that went West and the two of you keep following this trail." Micah stated.<p>

After the sun had set Micah called for camp. Lucas went to his bed role right after supper, which told Micah something was wrong.

>"James, I forgot I still need to swear Lucas in. Be right back." Micah said as he got up. After swearing his friend in, Micah sat down.
"Something bothering you Lucas-boy?" Micah asked.

>"Mark. He and I had an argument shortly before you showed up. He feels like I 'don't let him do anything by himself' and that I'm constantly 'looking over his shoulder'."
"Do you?"

>"Micah, you know I've been a little more cautious these last few months, especially after that Indian chief tried to take Mark from me. But I'm his father, and I have a right to worry about him. And I tried explaining to him that he does plenty by himself, but he still has some maturing to do... He just doesn't get it."
"As long as he's a boy, and you're trying to convince him that he's growing up, but you still are going to watch over him he won't. Mark will feel like you just aren't listening to him."

>"What am I supposed to do? Wait till he's married and has children?"
"He needs to understand why you still need to protect him, why there are some things you don't let him do himself."

>"I have-"
"Lucas, in Mark's mind, what happened with the judge, the Indians, the Garners, typhoid, and all of the other situations where you've almost lost him, are all past events that are now just bad memories. He doesn't link them together and see that all of those events _scare you, because they make you realize that you can't always protect him. He doesn't see the potential you see of those things happening again. Mark needs to see the dangers of you just letting him do whatever he wants. Make these things clear to him. He's eleven, he doesn't always put two and two together... And when he does, it doesn't always make four."

>"Thanks Micah. I am curious though... You've never had kids... how do you understand Mark this way?"
"You're not the only one who comes to me with problems. Get some shut eye Lucas-boy."

"Now Mark, you eat your breakfast or you'll make us late for church." Hattie told Mark.

>"Just not very hungry, I guess. Sorry Ms. Hattie." Mark said, stirring his oatmeal some more.
"Mark, what's the matter, dear? I thought I noticed something wasn't right last night when Lucas left." Mark hesitated before answering.

>"I just don't understand Pa. He says he knows I'm growing up, but he doesn't act like it. I feel like he treats me like a baby. I don't need Pa..."
"Mark McCain!"

>"That's not what I meant, Miss Hattie. I know he does an awful lot for me and loves me, I just don't need him watching over me like a mother bird. I'm eleven, I need room to fly."
"Mark, you're right... partially. You are eleven, only eleven. Your Pa does more than you will ever realize, and I am surprised he lets you out of his sight at all." Mark looked up, confused.

>"What?"
"Mark, you're only a child. You've never been a parent so it's hard to explain... you remember when Mr. Jackford had his hired hands drag your Pa? Or when one of the Hadley brothers held a gun on your Pa to keep you quiet? How did you feel?"

>"Scared for Pa. He's my Pa... I love him, I didn't want anything to happen to him."
"Mark just like you felt for your Pa in those moments, your Pa constantly feels for you when he doesn't have you by him, or sometimes even while he's right next to you. He wants to protect you, but also knows he needs to let you be independent. Mark, when you've been taken in the past, you eventually get over it, right?"

>"Yeah." Mark said, not sure he understood what she was trying to tell him.
"Your Pa doesn't. Sure, the dreams may stop, or he may appear less protective, but Mark you have to understand he loves you and wants to protect you from what you can't stop yourself."

>"Freddie what'd you get me into?"Mark mumbled.
"What?"

>"Freddie made me do something really stupid the other day... Secrets have never ended well between me and Pa..."
"I don't think Freddie could have made you do anything, especially keep your mouth shut."

>because his Pa wanted to keep Mark from growing up, he did it out of love. Mark finished his oatmeal and turned to Hattie.
"I know the preacher is here only so often, but I need to do some thinking..."

>"Be back here before the service lets out." Hattie said. Mark was a very confused young man sometimes, but if you have him long enough, he'd come around.<p>

The posse had been gone for five days with no word. Mark often checked with the telegraph office but always walked away disappointed. Mark realised just how much he really did love and miss his father, but didn't only need to tell Lucas he loved him, Mark also knew there were some major apologies he needed to make. He thought back to the night he had thrown his immature tantrum. The look of disappointment and hurt on his father's face kept appearing in his mind. He woke one night from a nightmare. In his dream, he had seen that look on his Pa's face... and Lucas had been lying in a casket. Mark prayed he would see his Pa soon, alive.

Lucas and James were tired, and Micah was purely exhausted. Finally, the trail led to a small mining town. The three men made their way to the sheriff's office, but were surprised at what they found.

>"Sheriff?" Micah called as they entered the office.
"Looks like someone's been drinking on the job." James said, gesturing to a man

passed out on the desk and picking up an empty bottle.

>"Shh..." Lucas said. He froze in place and listened. He heard the sound again and went for the keys lying on the desk. He unlocked the door that led to the cells.
"Lucas, what are you- Nils? John? What happened? You're supposed to be following the outlaws down south." Micah asked. Lucas and Micah quickly untied the men after unlocking the cells.

>"They came here and met up with some other men. We obviously got caught..."
"How on earth did you get here before we did?" Micah asked.

>"I thought their trail looked like they where wasting time." Lucas said.
"They want us here?" James asked.

>"It's definitely a possibility." Lucas said as he walked into the office part of the building and went towards the desk. As Lucas reached to open one of the drawers, it was made obvious the man slumped over the desk wasn't passed out. He drew his gun.
BANG! BANG! BANG! Lucas was consumed by darkness.

Micah saw what happened and wasted no time in returning fire to the outlaw. He wasn't a problem any more, but the three that had entered the office where. John was unarmed and made his way to Lucas to pull him out of the line of fire. Nils ducked and looked around for a gun. James shot, nicking the tallest of the three men, then fired a few more times to finish him off, trying not to get hit himself. Micah fired twice and hit the man to the right with his second shot. John grabbed Lucas' rifle and was able to eventually hit the third man.

>"They where the ones that robbed the stage, Micah. We heard them talking about it." Nils said.
"All that paper work for four dead men... Lucas!" Micah exclaimed, remembering why he had started firing in the first place. He walked over to John who had Lucas' head in his lap.

>"How is he?"
"Not good Micah. We need to get him to a doctor, help me carry him." John said to no one in particular.

The four men paced impatiently in the doctor's office, waiting for news, praying it would be good. Nils and John gave Micah a full account of what happened as they trailed the outlaws, how they had managed to get caught, and what they had picked up on from the men's conversations. All three men offered support to James, who had never actually taken someone's life before. He was young, and this had been his first posse to ride with. Had more men been in town, he wouldn't have been on, let alone been asked to join the posse.

>The hours slowly crept by. They all waited thinking the same thing.
'_That should be me._'

The young doctor and his wife emerged from the back room. The four men from the posse looked at the tall man, waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, Micah spoke.

>"Well, doc? Is he going to live?"
"I'm sorry Marshall, I don't know. I've done everything I can, the bullets are out, but he's in a bad way. His lung took severe damage and he won't be using his left arm for some time." A heavy silence blanketed the room. Everyone wanted to say something, but they didn't know what.

>"Does the man have any family?" the doctor's wife asked.
"A young son, that's all."

>"How young? Too young to handle this?" The doctor asked.
"Doctor, the boy is only eleven years old, but if you are asking of his age as to send for him or not, we need to. His father and him have a bond like no other, and Lucas needs to see his son when he wakes up."

>"I don't like to be so blunt, Marshall, but it's not a matter of when, it's a matter of if he wakes. I don't know if having the boy here..." the doctor paused for a moment after seeing Micah's expression. "Bring the child here, if you feel it is necessary. But he will not be seeing his father in that condition." The doctor firmly stated. Micah took a moment to respond. Not only was this man saying his best friend may die, but also that he wasn't going to allow Mark to see Lucas if he didn't wake up.

>"Doctor, the boy needs to see his Pa weather he's awake or not, There is something special between those two you just can't explain. The boy lost his mother, you can't keep him from his father." The doctor didn't understand why the Marshall would insist on such a young, impressionable boy seeing his father in the state he was in. And if his mother had died, the child didn't need to watch another of his parents struggle for life and then die.
"We'll discuss this more when the boy gets here. I have other patients to attend to, if you'll excuse me. No one disturb him." The doctor said prior to leaving the office. The woman followed her husband, and stopped at the door.

>"Bring the boy, quickly... I'm sorry, but your friend may not have much time. I'll try to talk Tom into letting the child see his father." And with that, the woman left.<p>

Nils, Micah, James, and John all discussed how they should go about bringing Mark out. They bounced around several ideas. They needed to leave someone with Lucas, and someone needed to bring Mark back. They finally decided that John would stay with Lucas until Micah brought Mark back with him. Nils, James, and Micah left as soon as they could. The outlaws had taken an extremely long route to Harrisonville, and Micah figured it would only take two days of moderately paced riding to get back to North Fork. Micah almost stayed with Lucas himself, but he knew he had an obligation to his friend that he couldn't fulfill next to Lucas. He needed to be there for Mark, and give Mark the comfort and guidance the boy would be needing.

Mark had been so distracted, he hadn't even heard the teacher call for lunch. Soon the classroom was empty except for Mark and the teacher.

>"Mark? Are you going to eat lunch? Mark McCain!?" She said, snapping her fingers.
"Oh, I'm sorry Ms. Adams."

>"Mark, is everything alright? You've been distracted all day..."
"I'm sorry. I... I was just thinking about Pa." The teacher could see Mark was close to tears. The posse had left nine days prior and no one had heard anything.

>"Mark, have you been out to the ranch in the past few days?"
"No ma'am. I didn't want to be..." Mark couldn't finish what he was thinking. He was too close to crying. He didn't know if going to the ranch would help or make things worse.

>"Mark, it may be difficult, but I think you should. I'm sure your chores need tending to if you haven't been out there. I want you to head out to the ranch now."
"But it's the middle of the school day-"

>"Mark, you hate school. You need to go home. Just be back by the end of school."
"Thank you Ms. Adams." Mark said as he stood up and left.

When Mark got to the ranch he started to take care of his chores. Being home and remembering all the conversations he and his father

had had there, made Mark feel better. While in the barn, he thought again about his argument with Lucas.

>'I was so stupid. Pa loves me and only wants what's best for me... and I wanted him to leave me alone. My whole world would end if I didn't have Pa.'

Mark rode past the school as Ms. Adams walked out behind the rest of her students.

>"Mark?" She called. Mark dismounted and walked over to his teacher.
"You need to talk to Micah." At the mention of Micah, Mark got excited.

>"They're back? Where are they?" Mark asked excitedly.
"Probably at the office." Ms. Adams said.

>"Thank you, Ms. Adams!"
Mark jumped back onto Blue Boy and hurried his horse the rest of the way into town. He was so excited to see his Pa, he had missed him so much. Mark longed to feel his father's touch.

"Pa? Micah?" Mark called as he entered the office.

>"Mark, come in. Would you like something to drink?" Micah asked. He had no idea how he was going to tell Mark the news and was trying to stall. Mark looked around the office, but didn't see his father.

Then, Mark saw Micah's face.
"Wh... Where's Pa?"

>"Mark, sit down son."
"I don't want to sit down. I wanna know where my Pa is!"

>"Mark, calm dow-" Micah said as he put his hands on Mark's shoulders.
"Micah, please tell me Pa's alright! He has to be!"

>"Mark there was trouble with the outlaws... and your Pa, was shot."
"No! Pa can't be dead!" Mark cried, as he collapsed into Micah.

>"Oh no, Mark. Your Pa is still alive, but I have to tell you, he's in a critical condition." Micah managed to say.
"Where is he? I want to see him!" Mark exclaimed.

>"Mark, we had to leave him in Harrisonville, he wasn't stable enough to be moved. John Hamilton is there with him, waiting for us to come back. Mark, go over to Ms. Hattie's and get your things together, we'll leave after supper." Mark didn't need to be told twice. He bolted from the office and ran across the street to Hattie's home. Hattie had just come home from the general store on a break when Mark entered the house. She followed him to the room he had been staying in.
"Mark what are you doing?"

>"Pa got shot and is in Harrisonville. Micah is taking me over there." Mark said in a monotone voice. He was trying to stop the tears, and didn't trust himself to talk any differently.
"Oh, Mark..." Hattie said as she gave the boy a hug. "I'm sure he's going to be just fine."

>Mark just nodded as he walked out of the bedroom, and then left the house. He tried to get Micah to leave right away, and even though Micah wanted to, he knew he needed rest. After supper the two where off and rode until well past dark. Micah didn't like the idea of traveling open country like this with Mark, but the next stagecoach to Harrisonville wasn't for another two weeks. He knew that neither Mark or Lucas could last that long. Micah soon remembered the young, cocky doctor that had said he wasn't going to let Mark see Lucas in his condition. Micah hoped the wife could change his mind, but wondered how bad off Lucas really was. He hadn't seen Lucas before they left, the doctor wouldn't allow it.
Micah's thoughts where interrupted by a sudden scream. Micah walked over to Mark, who had bolted upright in his bed roll. Mark soon realized it was just a

nightmare, but was afraid it would become real.

>"Oh, Micah, he can't die... Pa can't die!" Mark sobbed, as Micah gave him a hug. Micah wished he could give Mark assurance Lucas wasn't going to die, but he couldn't. Mark eventually laid back down to go to sleep, but a short while later, Micah heard quiet sobs.
"Pa, please... you can't die!"

As soon as they rode into Harrisonville early two mornings later, Mark headed for the doctor's office, but Micah stopped him.

>"Mark, let's go over to the hotel and get something to eat, first." Micah said as he took the reins.
"I want to see Pa." Mark spoke in a whisper. He had been on the verge of crying all morning and had so far kept his emotions under control, he wasn't going to break now.

>"Mark, we are going to the hotel first. There is no way the doctor will let you in to see your Pa all dirty like you are anyhow." Mark wanted to argue, but he couldn't bring himself to talk again. Micah guided both horses to the hotel. As they entered, they saw John Hamilton eating in the cafe. Micah went to reserve a room and see about baths, while Mark hurried over to the banker.
"How's Pa?" Mark asked. John could hear the emotion in the boy's voice. He didn't know how to tell Mark about Lucas. John wondered if Mark really needed to know the extent of Lucas' injuries. The doctor had made it quite clear to his wife and John that Mark wouldn't be seeing Lucas until he was in a better condition, and that he was doubtful that would happen.

>"Mark, Lucas hasn't woken up. The doctor won't know that much until he does." John stated.
Micah walked over and told Mark what room they were in and where to go for his bath.

>"I'll be up in a minute." After Mark left, Micah continued. "How is Lucas really doing?"
"Not good, Micah. He hasn't woken since he was shot. We've heard him mumble here and there, that's it. He is having difficulty breathing and..." John almost couldn't say it, he waited a long time before continuing. "Micah, we almost lost him - twice."

>"Aren't we currently almost losing him?" Micah asked, defeated.
"No, Micah, I mean his heart stopped."

>"How's the doctor coming along?"
"Still says he won't let Mark see Lucas. Oh, and this came yesterday, Sam forwarded it." John said, handing Micah a telegraph. After reading it, Micah didn't say anything.

>"What is it?"
"I've been ordered to join a posse out looking for a group of outlaws. Seems they're pretty dangerous, quite a large posse being put together."

>"Are you going to go?" Micah paused a long time before answering in a low, cold voice.
"Doesn't look like I have a choice."

>"Well then I'm not going back to North Fork. I understand you need to go Micah, but please explain to Mark why he can't see his father... you're like a grandfather to that boy, and I don't know how to handle children."
"How do I explain to him what has no reason to it?"

>"I don't know, that's why I couldn't tell him earlier." John and Micah continued to discuss Lucas and Mark as they ate. When Mark came down, he ordered his food begrudgingly. He wanted to see his Pa. Now. After the waitress left, Mark continued to argue.
"I can eat later. I want- I need to see Pa." Mark looked into the faces of the two men he was sitting across from him. He looked into their eyes.

>"What aren't you telling me?" Mark asked scared and confused. Both men stared at each other, waiting for the other to say something.

Suddenly Mark heard a voice behind him.
"They're not telling you that you can't see your Pa right now, boy."

>"Why not?" Mark asked, challenging the man as he stood.
"Because I'm the doctor and I say you can't." The doctor said as he reflected on his own father's passing. How he wished someone would have told him that.

>"Please, I have to see him!" Mark begged.
"He's not well enough for visitors..." The doctor carefully chose his words after receiving a certain look from both Micah and John.

>"But he's my Pa, please!"
"I'm sorry boy, if- when he's awake you may see him. Not before." Mark couldn't believe what he was hearing. He looked at Micah and John for support, but they said nothing.

>Angry, scared, distraught, and hurt Mark ran from the table and up to his room.
"Why? Why won't you let him? He's not going to harm Lucas!" John said.

>"Do you know what seeing a parent in that condition could do to the boy?" The doctor asked.
"He's seen Lucas worse off." John stated. Micah suddenly saw something in the doctor's eye he hadn't seen before.

>"Do you speak from experience?" Micah asked.
"Excuse me. I need to check on my patient." The doctor said as he walked away.

>"John, I really need to go if I want to catch up with that posse. I'm going to talk to Mark. There are two beds in our room, you can stay in there with him."<p>

Mark threw himself into the bed. Why wasn't Micah or Mr. Hamilton doing anything? Was there more they weren't telling him? Then the doctor's words replayed in his head.

>'I'm sorry boy, if- when he's awake...' Was his Pa really going to die? Mark burst into tears. He heard the door open, but didn't move. He felt Micah's hand on his shoulder, but didn't react.

>"Mark, I know this is hard. John and I have been trying to change the doctor's mind, but he won't budge. Mark, I have to go.. I've been ordered to join a posse. Promise me you'll listen to Mr. Hamilton."
"Micah? Is Pa... is he going to die? Please tell me the truth." Mark asked.

>"Only God knows, Mark." Micah allowed Mark to talk to him and release his fears before he left. Micah prayed by the time he caught up with the posse they would have the criminals and he would be able to turn around.
Even though talking with Micah had helped, Mark was still frighten and confused. He knew Micah left because he had a duty to help capture the outlaws, but he still felt... almost hurt that Micah left. He knew everything was out of his control, but the thought of losing his Pa made Mark sick.

>'What if Pa does die? I will have never have gotten to apologize... I... I won't be able to tell him I love him. What if...' A million questions swirled around Mark's head. He needed Micah to help him... no, he needed his Pa to help him make sense of it all. Mark knew he loved his Pa, the thought of losing him made Mark feel sick. He needed his Pa to survive. Mark prayed that if his Pa's condition was as bad as the doctor made it sound that his Pa wasn't feeling any pain. Later that day, Mark left the hotel room and went downstairs. John Hamilton met him in the lobby.

>"Where are you going Mark?" Mr. Hamilton asked.
"On a walk."

>"Would you like some company?"
"No offense, but I need some time alone."

>"I understand. Be back to our room by dark."
"Yes, sir." Mark

walked out of the hotel and down the street. He didn't know exactly where he was going and was surprised when Mr. Hamilton let him go by himself. Mark aimlessly wandered for a while before ending up at the church. As he entered, Mark removed his hat then sat in the back pew.

'_God, please help me._' Mark silently prayed. '_I don't know what to do... I'm confused... afraid... scared for Pa. I know I want him here, with me, but I also know sometimes you decide not to give us what we want. But God, please... I need my Pa. I didn't mean it when I said before that I wanted him to leave me alone, I already know why he worries about me, and now understand it even more, because now he could... die. Please, God let him live._' Suddenly, Mark heard the unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked behind his head. He knew he should stay still, not make any sudden movements, but his body wouldn't listen. He jumped up and twirled around.

>"Take it easy there, boy." A man standing next to the one with the gun said. He continued, "We are going to take a short trip to the border and you are going to make sure we get there without any problems. Now, we can do this the easy way or the hard way."
Mark couldn't stand the thought of leaving his Pa. What if he were to wake up and find out what happened? Would He try to come after him? What if his Pa died and he didn't get to say goodbye? Mark dropped to the ground and rolled farther to the left before coming out from under the pew. He stood up and went to run out of the church, but the man with the gun caught him by his collar.

>"My friend gave you a choice and you chose the hard way. Not a very good choice." He said as he back handed Mark twice. "Come." The man said as he motioned for Mark to walk. Mark realised he had made a very stupid decision. There were two of them and one of them, they were faster, stronger, and had a gun. He submitted and walked out of the back door of the church.
About ten miles out of town, they met up with two other riders. The shorter of the two spoke first.

>"Who's the kid? Why do you have a brat?" The man who had held a gun on Mark the entire ride replied.
"Because the boss promised \$500 for the first one to return with... 'insurance.' And Andrew and I ain't splittin' it."

>Mark jumped as he heard a shot ring out, and flinched as he heard another. He looked to his left to see the two men that had originally taken him where now dead. He started at the two men in front of him.
'_If they could kill their partners just like that... what are they going to do to me? How am I going to get back to Pa?_' Mark asked himself. He couldn't take it anymore, he couldn't think, all Mark could do was act. He kicked the sides of the horse and wheeled around. He had to get to his Pa. The first time the man yelled after Mark to stop, Mark didn't pay any attention to him, but then he heard the gun and stopped his horse just as soon as he could. One of his two captors rode over to him and punched him so hard he fell off the horse.

>"Are we going to have any more problems?" He asked. Mark shook his head. He wasn't so much answering the man as he was trying to clear his head.
"Good. Now listen here, you behave and we'll let you go as soon as we get to the border. But you move one inch without being told and, well my friend here isn't gun shy." Mark quickly nodded his head. He didn't know if he would actually be let go or not, but for now he would do as he was told and figure out how he was going to get back to his Pa if they didn't let him go. They eventually made it to a camp where about five other men were. Mark was offered some jerky and biscuits, but was too worried about his Pa to eat anything. He

was tied and left alone for the night. Mark knew worrying wouldn't do anything so he tried sleeping, but the men where being too loud. So he went back to what he had been doing before he got into trouble - he prayed.

John Hamilton checked all over town. He had taken responsibility for Mark only a few hours prior, and yet he had already lost track of the boy. The longer he searched, the more concerned he became. At first, he just figured Mark had lost track of time, but he was no where to be seen and Blue Boy was still in the livery. What was he going to tell Micah? What was he going to tell Lucas if he woke up and Mark was still missing.

>' Lucas! Of course, Mark must have gone to see his father!' John thought. He walked down the street and entered the doctor's office.

>"Doctor, is Mark McCain here?"
"No, I haven't seen him since I was at the hotel."

>"Do you mind if we check Lucas' room? The boy was quite upset and he may have snuck in through the window..."
"He better not have." The doctor said as he rose. The two men walked to the back of the clinic, passing several doors on their way. They opened the door, the doctor relieved, John devastated, to find no Mark.

>"Where could he be?" John asked.
"Probably back at the hotel, wondering where you are. I'm sure the boy's fine." The doctor said at John's surprise. The doctor actually seemed to have a hint of humanity in his voice.

John walked back to the hotel, but still didn't find Mark. He eventually made his way to the sheriff's office, where he informed the temporary Marshall who had taken the place of the deceased sheriff that morning, what was going on. He helped John search the town again and apologetically explained they would have to wait until morning to organize a search party to look around the country side. John walked back to the hotel room defeated. Mark was missing, Micah was out risking his neck to track down criminals, and Lucas was lying in the doctor's office struggling for life. He couldn't do anything for any of them.

Mark woke up being drug to his feet. He felt like his eye was swollen and his face hurt where he had gotten punched and back handed, but he just prayed his Pa was still alive. The men where ready to leave camp and he was put on a horse that was led by a man he hadn't seen before. He was tall, had black hair, and terrifying blue eyes. Mark couldn't the chills from crawling up his spine as he sat uncomfortably staring at the man. The men where obviously in a hurry, they rode hard and only stopped for a quick lunch and a few, extremely short, breaks for the horses. Mark was somewhat relieved when they rode up and unloaded at an old abandoned cabin. Mark was tied up in one of the back rooms, but was able to hear the men's conversations. As they talked, Mark began to wonder if they where the group of outlaws Micah was after. He also wondered if Mr. Hamilton had found the trail they had left. Mark had done his best to mark the trail, but he was being watched very closely, and he could only think of one person that could pick up on his trail markers he had been able to leave, and that person wouldn't be coming after him. Mark's thoughts where completely consumed with Lucas. Mark thought about the good and the bad times they had with each other. Mark thought about everything his Pa had taught him, and how if God gave him the chance, he would never take his Pa for granted again.

The next morning Mark heard horses approaching the cabin. He figured it was just more outlaws until he heard one man ordering the other to tie Mark up in the closet. The man entered the room and Mark fought against him, he wanted to get out of there and back to his Pa. The man who was trying to tie Mark up was getting frustrated. He slapped Mark across the face, ordering him to stop, but Mark wouldn't. He took the butt of his gun and hit Mark on the back of the head, sending Mark into a state of unconsciousness.

Micah rode away from Harrisonville more than frustrated. He was MAD. He knew he carried the badge and that came with responsibilities, but this wasn't the first time his badge had kept him from where he needed to be.

>'We almost lost him - twice.' Echoed in his head, along with Mark's worried questions. Micah rode through the night. He wanted to join the posse and get back to Harrisonville as soon as he could.

>The next morning he came across the posse that appeared to be breaking camp.
"Marshall Torrance, North Fork. How come you men haven't broke camp yet?"

>"We've been tracking for about three hours actually. This is where they made camp last night." Micah dismounted and started examining the camp ground with the other men. The Marshall who was in charge, Marshall McKinley, called for everyone to mount up.
After about an hour they entered a canyon and the tracker said he couldn't make out which way they went.

>"They went to the right, didn't you see the trail marker?" Micah asked
"What are you talking about?"

>"Whoever they have prisoner left another trail marker. See the 'X' scratched on that rock?"
"What prisoner? They have a prisoner?" McKinley asked.

>"Didn't you see the scuffle and smaller set of boot prints back at the camp?"
"No, why didn't you say anything?"

>"I thought you all knew."
"Well we didn't. Anything else we should know?" McKinley acted like he was frustrated with Micah for not saying anything, but was more frustrated that he hadn't picked up on it himself.

>"Prisoner I'd say is about eleven or twelve. Smart kid though."
The large posse continued, but every now and then the tracker, Jenkins, wouldn't know where to go. Micah would eventually figure out in which direction they went and showed Jenkins how to recognize this captive's signs.

>"Just how are you so good and finding these?"
"We're just lucky the kid uses a lot of the same methods a friend of mine does." Micah replied. He suddenly realized and inwardly chuckled at the fact that they might be getting suspicious of him. But then he wondered about the trail markers, and the size of the boot prints...

>'No, Mark's back in Harrisonville with John.' Micah assured himself.

The next morning, they rode up to an old cabin with about nine horses outside. They easily got the three 'standing gaurd', who where sleeping on the job. After strategically placing themselves around the cabin, McKinley called to those inside the cabin.

>"This is US Marshall McKinley. You're surrounded, come out with your hands up!"
They heard glass breaking and a gun shot.

>"Come out, or we're coming in!" He continued.
"Marshall, the first one that comes in here not only gets his head blown of, but this little brat's too!" Someone yelled from inside the cabin.

>"You have three minutes to get out here!" McKinley said.
"And you have two minutes to clear out before this kid gets shot!"
>McKinley motioned for Micah and a few others to come over to him.
"I'll keep him busy, you go around back and see if you can get in."
>"You touch one hair on his head and I'll-"
"You don't want the boy's life on your hands, now do you? Clear out!"
>"Bronson, I'll cut you a deal. Let the kid go and we'll get out of your hair, let you ride to the border."<p>

Bronson laughed. What did they think he was? An idiot? He sent a shot out the window. The two men with him followed his lead and started aimlessly shooting. Suddenly the kitchen door swung open and five men stepped in, guns drawn.

>"Nice and easy now, drop you guns." Jenkins ordered.
Bronson knew it was three to five and there wasn't a chance of escape. He was the first to drop his gun, then the other two did the same.
>"Where are the other two?" A Marshall asked.
"What do you mean?" Bronson asked.
>"We're not stupid. There where nine horses. Three standing gaurd outside, one in the kitchen, three of you. That leaves two un-accounted for."
"James got money hungry." One of the men said.

>Micah began searching the rest of the house. He wasn't so much concerned about finding outlaws, he needed to find their hostage. He opened up a closet in a back room and was astounded by what he saw.
"Mark!" Micah exclaimed.
>"You know him?" McKinley asked as he entered the room.
"My friend's son..." Micah said, beginning to untie an unconscious Mark.
"Mark, wake up, son." Micah repeated as he tried to rouse Mark. Micah picked Mark up and carried him outside to the horses. He grabbed a canteen and poured a little bit of water over Mark's face.

Mark heard someone calling to him, and slowly opened his eyes. At first, everything was fuzzy but then he began to focus.
>"Micah! What are you doing here?" Mark asked as he sat up, rubbing the back of his head.
"I was doing my job. What, may I ask, are you doing here? Are you alright?" Micah asked seeing several bruises on the boy's face.
>"I'm fine. I was at the church praying for Pa... Pa, is he alright, do you know?"
"No boy, I haven't heard anything. How did you get from the church to here?"
>"Well these men kinda held on gun on me and made me come with them. It wasn't long after you left. Oh, Mr. Hamilton must be looking all over..." Micah looked Mark over and didn't see anything else besides the bruises on his face and knot on the back of his head.
"I'm going to need a statement from you, boy. We can ride and make it to Berkley by tomorrow afternoon." McKinley said.
>"We can also make it to Harrisonville by tomorrow afternoon. I'll send his statement in with my report. His Pa is recovering from two gunshot wounds and the boy hasn't seen him since he was shot."
McKinley of course wanted to know what happened, so Micah filled him in on the details as Mark and Micah got ready to go. It was decided that the whole posse would go to Harrisonville instead of riding to Berkley. McKinley offered Mark a horse, but Micah said Mark would ride double with him.
"Micah, I can ride by myself." Mark protested.

>"You're Pa is going to have a big enough bone to pick with me when he wakes up. You're exhausted and you have a head injury, which you and I both know can be pretty serious because of your incident last

spring. We don't need you falling out of the saddle."
"But Micah!"

"Mark McCain, you get in that saddle." Micah ordered.<p>

As they rode, Mark thought more and more about his Pa lying in the doctor's office.

"Micah, do you think Pa's woken up yet?"
"We can pray he hasn't." Both Micah and Mark knew if Lucas woke up and found out Mark had gone missing, there would be nothing but trouble.

"Do you think the doctor is going to let me see Pa?"
"Mark, I don't know, and I think you should've seen your Pa last night. But promise me you won't argue with the doctor." Mark didn't know why Micah was asking this of him, but Micah was using that tone, so he nodded.

They rode into Harrisonville late the next afternoon. Another search party was about to go look for Mark when John spotted him riding with Micah and ran over to them.

"Mark where have you been? Micah what happened?" John asked, seeing Mark's face. As they dismounted and walked into the hotel, Mark and Micah gave John a brief summary of what happened. John went to tell everyone the news and Micah told Mark to order something.
"Micah, I can't eat."

"Mark, it's obvious you're hungry. Eat a little before we go over to have the doctor check you out."
"Micah I can't eat. The thought of Pa..."

"Mark, I know you're worried about your Pa, but you can't waste away. You won't do him any good sitting her fretting and getting sick because you haven't eaten. Now order something before I do it for you." Mark picked up the menu and started looking it over. He decided he would get some stew. It looked like the only thing his stomach could handle. After eating Mark and Micah walked over to the doctor's office. As they entered the office, they saw the doctor emerging from a room at the end of a hallway.
"Is my Pa alright? Has he woken up yet?"

"Just finished checking on him." The doctor said, not looking up from his notes. "He's more stable than he was before, but hasn't woken up yet." "What happened? John told me they had found Mark, but he didn't say he suffered any injuries..." the doctor said, sounding concerned.
"Would you mind looking him over doc? Just to make sure there's nothing seriously wrong?"

Micah asked. The doctor nodded and opened a door to an examination room. As he checked Mark over, he asked how he managed to get each injury.
"Well I tried getting away... a couple times. They would backhand me or punch me. Then the last time while one of them was trying to tie me up, I'm pretty sure he hit my head with the back of his gun. But it doesn't hurt that bad any more."

"Doctor, last spring Mark's skull was fractured and there was a lot of nerve damage. It's healed, but I'd still like to be sure this didn't do anything to his head." Micah said.
"Well Mark, it looks like you're going to be sore for the next few days, but nothing else seems to be wrong." The doctor said.

"Can I see Pa?" Mark eagerly asked.
"Mark, I don't think it's a good idea. But when your Pa wakes up and if he says he wants to see you, you may."

"You think he'll live?" Mark asked.
"Mark, honestly we still can't say, but he does seem to be getting stronger."

Mark and Micah went back to the hotel where they met up with Mr. Hamilton. It was decided that John would sleep in a connecting room, but Micah and Mark would share the room with two beds. Mark filled

Mr. Hamilton in on the details of what went on. Several times John would try to apologize to Mark or Micah for 'letting this happen', but they both made it clear they didn't blame him nor was there cause to. Micah had to go over to the sheriff's office to fill out his report and submit Mark's statement, and John had to go send a few telegraphs. Mark lied on the bed and wanted to cry, but he didn't know if he would be able to stop if he started. He had to be strong for Micah, for his Pa, but most of all... for himself. He wanted to erase the emotions from the last week from his mind, but couldn't find a way to, so he fell into a deep sleep.

Early the next evening, Mark entered the doctor's office for the umpteenth time that day.

>"Mark, he hasn't woken up yet. I promise you I will let you know when he does. Why don't you go over to the general store and get a candy?" The doctor asked as he held out a penny.
"No thanks. Doc I don't care that he's not going to respond to me, I just need to see him..."

>"Mark, when I was a bit younger than you my father took seriously ill. The doctor let me into see him, and it almost destroyed me. I don't want the same thing to happen to you."
"But it won't..."

>"Mark, I don't know you that well, that's why I'm leaving it up to your Pa. I have a poll, why don't you go down to the pond and do some fishing to keep your mind off of it?"
"No thanks. I'm going to go back to the hotel." Mark said as he turned around. He thought of the last time he had gone fishing with Freddie. The secret he kept from his father because of that trip. He was just trying to show Freddie he could be a man... maybe even show himself. But he had just been plain stupid, and then he continued to want to show his Pa he could be a man, causing their last words to be harsh ones. Mark entered his room and sat on the bed. He had been just sitting and staring at the wall for quite some time when Micah entered.

>"Mark have you eaten?" Mark didn't hear Micah's question. Micah moved in front of Mark and snapped his fingers. "Mark?"
"Huh? Sorry Micah, I didn't realize you came in." Mark said as he moved his gave from Micah back to the wall.

>"I asked if you've eaten."
"No not yet. I went to doc's after saying goodbye to Mr. Hamilton at the train station."

>"Mark you've got to stop bothering the doctor. He's got enough on his hands and promised he would come get you as soon as he woke up."
"Micah, you don't understand..."

>"Mark, I know this is tough, but..." Mark burst into tears and stood up to go out the door.
Micah put his hand on the door handle.

>"Where are you going?" He calmly asked.
"Micah it's been over two weeks since I've seen my Pa! I don't even know if I believe you and the doctor anymore! I'm going to wait at the doctor's. Since the doctor won't let me see Pa and you won't do anything, I want to be as close to my Pa as I can!"

>Micah thought about what Mark was saying. Mark was losing hope and needed help.
"Stay out of the doctor's way." Micah said as he removed his hand from the door. Mark tore down the stairs and out of the hotel, but he didn't enter the doctor's office through the front door. He had seen the doctor coming from the very back room and had said he had just finished checking on his Pa. Mark went behind the building and saw a window about six feet off the ground. He looked around and found a few crates. After stacking them he climbed on top of them and looked through the window. He saw his Pa lying on the bed. Mark let out a sigh of relief as he watched his Pa breathe in

and out. Suddenly the door to his Pa's room opened and Mark ducked down. He prayed he hadn't been spotted. He waited a few minutes and looked back into the room and saw his Pa was alone again. Figuring it was late enough the doctor wouldn't be coming back, Mark opened the window and crawled through it and carefully dropped into the room. He stood at the side of his Pa's bed, letting the tears drip down his face.

>"Pa... I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. I need you Pa... Please don't leave me." Mark bent down and kissed his father's face. Then, Mark crawled onto the bed and laid against his father. He saw the bandages on his Pa's head, chest, and on his left arm, but was thankful his Pa was alive.
"I love you Pa." Mark whispered, finishing the last of his tears. He was finally with his Pa.

Early the next morning, Micah decided to check on Mark. He was surprised the doctor hadn't sent him to the hotel once he got there, and even more surprised when Mark didn't come to sleep at the hotel.

>"Doc? Where's Mark?" Micah asked as he entered the office.
"I don't know, I haven't seen him until early yesterday evening..."

>"He told me he was coming over here about eight. You haven't seen him?"
"No..."

>"Have you checked on Lucas this morning?" Rising, the doctor replied,
"No, and if that boy snuck in there, he's going to be in a heap of trouble!" The doctor continued to ramble on as they walked down the hallway about what he had told Mark about staying out of that room, but as he opened the door and he saw Mark lying with his Pa, he got quiet.

>"Mark..." Micah began.
"Let him be." The doctor simply stated as they walked out of the room.

>Micah didn't know what had changed in the doctor, but something had.<p>

Lucas heard the door shut and slowly opened his eyes. As his senses began to sharpen, he realized he had no idea where he was. Lucas began to slightly panic until he looked to his right and saw Mark cuddled against him, and relaxed. He took a minute to take everything in, and figured he was probably in a doctor's office by the look of the room, and the bandages on his body. He then remembered what had happened and pain began to shoot through his head. He lifted his right arm from underneath Mark to touch his head.

>Mark woke up from the support for his head being removed. At first he figured he'd been discovered and the doctor was moving Lucas' arm, but then he turned around and saw Lucas rubbing his head with his eyes closed.
"Pa!" Mark exclaimed as he embraced Lucas. "Pa, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it... I don't want you to _ever_ leave me alone. I love you Pa, I'm sorry I said what I did... I'm sorry I even thought it!" Mark said as he continued his long embrace.

>It took Lucas a second to figure out what Mark was talking about, between how fast Mark was talking and the tears he was speaking through, but he finally understood, and a smile came across his face.
"I know you didn't son. I love you very much, and I promise I won't ever leave you." By now, Lucas would have expected Mark to have released his grip, and realised something must have been seriously wrong.

>"Mark just how long was I asleep?" The door opened as Lucas spoke and Micah came in with a man Lucas didn't recognize, but presumed to be a doctor.
"About a week, Lucas-boy. You gave us quite a scare." Micah stated. The doctor asked Mark to get up so he could examine

Lucas, and as Mark went to stand by Micah, Lucas saw his boy's face.

>"Mark, what happened?" Lucas asked, appalled at the bruises on his son's face. Mark didn't want to answer his father. Right now was not the time for Lucas to find out about him being kidnapped, but at the same time he was ready to be done with the secrets... that was what had caused tension between them before.
"You know how boys are Lucas, always getting themselves into trouble. We'll let Mark tell you what happened some other time, it's a long story." Micah said with a laugh, trying to cover for Mark. Lucas chuckled with his friend, but Mark saw the '_oh, really?_' look Lucas was giving him and knew his father wasn't going to be kept in the dark for long.

>The doctor took his time in examining Lucas, to make sure everything checked out alright. As he did, he watched Mark and Lucas interact, and he saw something special between them.
"Micah, why don't you and I go over to the hotel and get all of us something to eat?" The doctor suggested. As he and Micah left the room, the doctor turned to Micah.

>"You where right, there is something unique in their bond... it's as though they're keeping a secret between each other."
"I suppose that would be the best way to describe it. Many people have tried and not been able to. They both do seem to share some sort of a secret... one filled with love."

"Pa, I really didn't know what I was saying when I asked you to leave me be... I understand now that everything you do for me is out of love and to protect me."

>"I'm glad you understand that Mark. You are growing up, but you're still..."
"Your little boy?" Mark sheepishly asked.

>"Yes Mark. You will always be my little boy." After a moment of silence, Lucas realized Mark was debating on weather to say something or not.
"Mark, what is it?"

>"Well Pa, like you said that day on the ranch... you're my Pa and I'm your son, we're partners, and there's no reason to keep secrets..." Lucas nodded. "I guess why I had been so stubborn and was trying to do everything by myself was because when I went fishing with Freddie I did something really stupid to 'prove I was a man' and I had to keep proving it because I didn't want to break down and tell you what we did..."
"And just what was that?" Lucas asked.

>"We... we smoked a pipe..."
"You _what_?" Lucas asked, surprised. "I thought you learned your lesson with the cigar, months back."

>"But this was a pipe... and Freddie kept calling me chicken and well, I know it was stupid, but I did it anyway so he wouldn't keep teasing me. I figured maybe it wouldn't make me sick like the cigar did."
"But it did." Lucas said, remembering back to the night Mark came home, dripping wet.

>"I figured you and Freddie's father would probably be able to smell the smoke on us and so Freddie and I both jumped into the lake to try to get some of the smell out. And then the next morning I was feeling bad about it so I left early for school. I then got agitated because I was trying to keep the secret and you kept trying to show me you loved me. I guess I just felt rotten."
"Mark, promise me you won't smoke _anything_, _**ever**_ _again_."

>"I promise, Pa."<p>

Eventually, the doctor gave Lucas permission to make the trip back home, via the stage coach. Micah had taken Razor and Blue Boy back to

North Fork with him a few days prior. Mark watched Lucas like a hawk to make sure he didn't over do himself. The last leg of the trip, Mark and Lucas where alone on the stage coach. Lucas went to grab a canteen, but Mark grabbed it for him.

>"Mark don't you think you're being a bit over protective now?" Lucas asked.

>"I'm your son, it's my job." Mark said as he looked up to his Pa and smiled.<p>

When the stage coach got to town, Mark and Lucas said hello to a few friends, then mounted their horses and rode for home. Mark was headed towards the house when Lucas slowed Razor and turned in a different direction. Mark was confused at first, but then realized they where headed for their 'spot' in the woods. After they dismounted and Lucas sat down, he sat Mark on his knee and looked his son in the eye.

>"Alright Mark, we're home and I'm fine now..." Lucas began.
"I wanted to tell you Pa, but Micah wouldn't let me..."

>"That's debatable, but now I want you to tell me, everything."

>Mark proceeded to tell Lucas how he had gotten kidnapped and why his face had several bruises.
"Mark, I've told you if you're ever taken-"

>"I know, cooperate. But Micah was gone and you where lying in the doctor's office... I had to get back to you, Pa. I marked our trail the best I could... but I still needed to see you. To know that you where alive... the way the doctor was talking, I thought you might be dead." Mark said as a tear escaped his eye. He quickly went to wipe it away, but Lucas took his son's hand.
"It's alright, Mark." Lucas told his son. Mark wrapped his arms around his Pa and let the tears flow.

>"No more secrets?" Lucas asked. Mark sat up and touched his father's face.
"No more secrets." Mark replied.

End
file.